

**MODERNIZING DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE DIGITAL ERA:
A CASE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY (IOU)**

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Abstract The development of technology is unavoidable. All fields are transforming digitally, including education. This journey of digitization began even before entering pandemic era that required everyone to interact online. International Open University (IOU), is an online-based Islamic campus that already has international accreditation. Carrying a mission as an Islamic higher education institution, IOU offered modern distance education system in the digital era. By using qualitative methods with a case study, this study aims to describe the digital teaching and learning system conducted by IOU. This research seeks to explore forms of modern distance education in an Islamic higher education, which in turn can contribute to create a future of education that is inclusive, professional, and well-being.

Keywords Distance education; Digital; Higher education; International Open University (IOU)

A. INTRODUCTION

Distance education has existed since Caleb Phillips from Boston, USA in 1728 offered a shorthand training. When he made an ad at the *Boston Gazette* and stated “may by having the several lessons sent weekly to them, be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston.” (Gershon, 2020). Which was later recognized as the earliest attempt at distance education. Then there are some of the following historical journeys in distance education:

Year	Events	Organizer
1852	Pittman shorthand program that allowed students to mail their work and upon successful completion of the course receive a certificate of expertise.	Sir Isaac Pittman
1858	Signation of a charter that allowed the University of London to provide distance-learning degrees.	Queen Victoria of Great Britain
1890	A correspondence course on mine safety was set up.	The Colliery School of Mines
1920s	The first claiming on a commercial license then used it to provide educational radio to its paying students and to anyone in the public that had a radio set.	Penn State
1965	The Educational Teleconference Network (ETN), providing learning over the phone.	The University of Wisconsin

1968	The Stanford Instructional Television Network was set up.	Stanford University
1969	The first Interface Message Processor (IMP) was set up.	The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
1969	The establishment of the British Open University in the United Kingdom using television and radio as media learning.	-
1980s	Using satellite TV to deliver a combination of live and recorded course material.	The National Technological University, US
1993	The first completely internet-based higher education institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission was opened.	Jones International University
2002	Open Course Ware (OCW) project public, which provided 32 MIT courses online for free.	The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
2007	Establishment of Online-Based Campus in Islamic Education	International Open University (IOU), The Gambia
2008	The birth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs),	Dave Cormier

Table 1. Compendious History of Distance Education

Source: (Gershon, 2020), (Thompson, 2018), and Author's Development.

This form of distance education has also occurred in the developing country such as Indonesia. In 2003, an Arabic class with a distance learning system was published. The learning modules are provided in the form of cassettes and books. Meanwhile, the exam is held within a certain period via e-mail (Source: author's experience).

Distance education probably has just exploded in around 2020, but the process itself actually has started in the past hundred's years. Distance education has long been conceptualized with the aim of streamlining the teaching and learning process for students who live in places far from the center of education. The theory of distance learning Stewart, Keagen, and Holmberg (Wijoyo & Sunarsi, 2021) distinguishes three main theories about distance education: (1) Theory of autonomy and independent learning, (2) Industrialization of education, and (3) Interactive communication.

Over time, technology continues to develop. The new generation is born as a native in the digital world. Which in turn encourages all fields to transform digitally. Including the education sector, it then modernized the distance education with digital concept by using e-learning system.

In this study, the author wants to explore an online campus from the Gambia, the International Open University. Which had started remote classes before entering pandemic era. After years, this campus has grown very well and its existence spread all over the world. The purpose of this study is to find out the distance education system used at IOU as an online-based higher education institution. This study will also explore the value of the benefits obtained from using digital system as a form of modernization in the concept of distance education.

B. METHODS

The research method used in this research is qualitative with a case study approach. Data collection techniques are carried out using secondary data, which came from documents in the form of data on websites, journals, and e-books.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Digitalization of Education

Starting from technological developments in ICT (Information Communication and Technologies) resulted in digital transformation in all fields, including education. (Nuraini, 2021) Digitalization in education, creating new ways in learning process. At the beginning, books were used as the only reference to get material in education, but then switched to computer-based systems. This transfer process changed the view of education towards books. Books and digital technology applications are a single unit as a learning reference. (Sitopu, n.d.)

Digitalization in education involves:

1. Development of infrastructure (providing high-performance computing, the Internet of Things, etc.),
2. Teaching materials (intelligent learning systems, automated assessment, etc.),
3. New models educational work (mobile communication with the teacher, individualization of educational work, etc). (Godin & Terekhova, 2021).

An educational system or concept that utilizes an information technology or electronic-based learning in a teaching and learning process is called e-learning. E-learning has 3 types of methods: (1) Conventionally, (2) Blended learning, and (3) The Internet of Things. (Nuraini, 2021)

The following is the development of the use of the platform in the evolution of e-learning over time. The journey that started from the concept of distance education was carried out using postal intermediaries, then developed using radio, television, satellite, to modernization using internet media and the system as a whole.



Figure 1. Timeline and major technology platforms in the evolution of e-learning

Source: (Sleator, 2010)

2. About International Open University

Opening the first class in 2007, International Open University (hereinafter, IOU) which was previously known as Islamic Online University is one of the pioneers of higher education institution that carries out the mission of spreading Islamic education through the concept of e-learning. Started by having a computer system server in Qatar, the IOU's presence then expanded to various countries around the world.

IOU aims to grant global access to quality undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate level education programs for students at virtually no cost. Its mission is to change the Muslim Nation and the world situation through appropriate, Islamized education. Making authentic Islamic knowledge readily available to the world through the Internet solely for God's pleasure is a noble life-goal and a mission well worth sacrificing all of one's energies and means for.

Founded by Dr. Bilal Philips, a graduate of Islamic University of Madinah, a master from King Saud University (KSU), and a doctor from University of Wales, UK, IOU carries a mix-and-match curriculum from some of the world's leading Islamic universities. Starting with one major:

Islamic Studies, IOU currently offers interdisciplinary majors with seven study programs at the bachelor's level, two study programs for matriculation classes, and one study program at the master and doctoral levels. With the slogan "changing the nation through education", the available study programs include the basics of Islamic education.

At this time, the IOU is based in the Gambia, West Africa. Obtained a number of licenses and accreditations for education institution, its diploma is recognized by all countries. Having hundreds of thousands of students spread across many countries in the world using English as the main language of instruction, IOU also offers 3 bachelor's programs in Russian, Indonesian, and Urdu, as well as 1 matriculation program and 1 master's program in Indonesian. (IOU, 2022)

3. IOU's Distance Education with e-Learning System

IOU's distance education uses an e-learning system that fully utilizes the internet. Starting from the registration process, accessing learning materials, communicating with teachers and administrative staff, to the assessment process and obtaining feedback on learning outcomes. The type of technology used is a web-based e-learning application. IOU has been internalizing digitalization since the beginning. Using the website platform with the web address <https://iou.edu.gm/>, students who have made payments can access all the information provided on the dashboard. All information and learning modules can be downloaded there. IOU also has an application that makes it easier for the platform to be accessed from a smartphone.

In most courses, IOU uses asynchronous e-learning activities, which Clark & Mayer (Nuraini, 2021) defined as e-learning activities in which students and teachers are involved in learning activities at the same times. IOU provides teaching materials in the form of document modules, audio, and video recordings, questions and answers via forums, email, and chat media. There are a small number of classes that use the synchronous e-learning system that using real-time video applications.

Learning system through downloadable modules. This module is in the form of text document files, audio recordings, and video recordings. IOU also provides an opportunity for students to upload summaries of the material they have made to be accessed by fellow students. There are interaction media other than email, namely communication forums on the platform. In some courses, live sessions are also held which allow live meetings between students and lecturers.

For the evaluation scheme, IOU provides module tests, midterm exams, assignments in the form of paper making, and final exams held at the final exam center that has been registered with IOU. For multiple-choice exams, such as module tests, mid-term exams, and final term exams, they use an automated computerized system.

Specifically for holding final exams, IOU provides opportunities for students to apply for examination centers as exam venues, which should be reputable institutions, preferably schools, universities, colleges, etc. Or simply choose a place that is close enough to the place of residence that has been registered on the IOU website. There are more than 2000 exam centers spread all over the world.

Especially for the post-graduate class, more emphasis is placed on making research papers, in order to familiarize students with doing research and writing scientific papers. Feedback for research papers is given by the teacher through voice notes to appreciate the results and provide constructive input for improving student writing.

As another requirement for graduation, each student is required to submit a community service report as a form of contribution to the community. This must be a social activity and following the minimum standard hours.

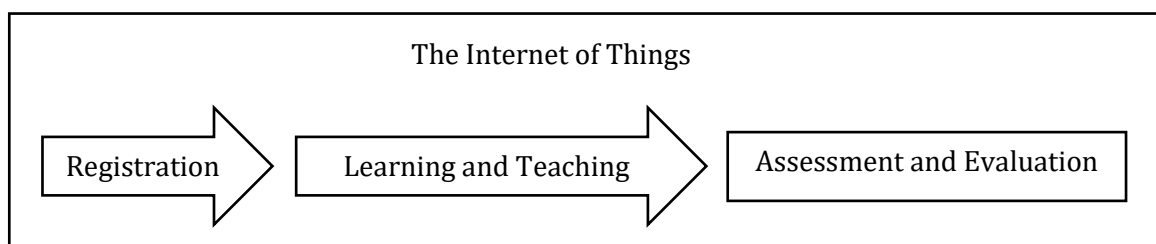


Figure 2. IOU's Distance Education e-Learning System

Source: Author's Development

4. Two Sides of Education

According to Verbitskiy, education has two sides of the coin: learning and upbringing, but digital learning is not about upbringing at all. Upbringing is about moral category: the laws, regulations, norms of social behavior, religious, gender, technical norms, etc. adopted in society. (V. & V., 2020)

It might be some sides there are shortcomings from the concept of distance education, but the education function will still run on the type of distance education that involves digitization. There is also research that discusses the new direction of Islamic education in the digital era. Islamic education is intended to educate the Muslim generation to become the caliph of Allah on this earth well, full of responsibility and spread positive behavior towards the environment. Creating a *Hasanan* in life.

The essence of *Hasanan* in life for Muslims includes three interrelated elements. First, control the wealth, position and network in the world. Second, rich in heart; absolute believers must be able to become religious activators. Third, both to fellow humans and the environment. Islamic education in the digital era should be packaged in digital form to suit the tendency of students who like to use digital devices in their daily lives. (Alfinnas, 2018)

This concept is also used as a mission by the IOU. Among the advantages of IOU as an Islamic campus are:

1. Following the teachings of the Qur'an and *sunnah*;
2. The curriculum was modified from the Islamic University of Madinah; Omdurman Islamic University, Sudan; and Al-Azhar University, Egypt.
3. Having lecturers from various well-known universities in the world.
4. IOU provides some courses that contain the basic principles of Islam in all available majors.

By mixing and matching the modern distance education system using digitalization and incorporating a curriculum that has religious values and is focused, IOU tries to create a new breakthrough to create a generation that is not only good at academics, but also has a good personality. Which is then expected to create a future of education that is inclusive, professional, and well-being.

C. CONCLUSION

Distance education provides a solution for students who want to study but are constrained by distance, unable to attend classes that are located far from where they live. This concept has existed for hundreds of years, and continues to evolve as technology advances. Entering the digital era, technology has become a basic need in the world of education. In this case, IOU as a higher education institution has used the digital concept since its inception. The use of digital concepts with the selection of the Internet of Things system can be very appropriate and useful for higher-

education institution. This research has not been carried out at the initial level of education, which may also be starting to develop at this time. Distance education learning also still has to pay attention to the concept of upbringing, not just the delivery of material. IOU is one of the founders of an Islamic-based campus that can be reached by many students from all over the world and continues to grow until now.

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